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ABSTRACT

In this paper, development during the adolescent period is considered from a counseling perspective. Although many of the issues of young adults continue to confront older adults, this paper discusses the issues that are special to this age group. It suggests that the emotional and social domain is best represented by the theory of Erikson, which states that the young adult stage focuses on the need to form significant personal relationships. The intimacy versus isolation dichotomy explained by Erikson represents a well-accepted view of one the major critical issues of this period. The works of Piaget and Arlen are used to discuss cognitive and intellectual development and how the young adult's thinking and learning process change and mature. Super's developmental theory of careers, which stresses the need to establish job stability, is used to describe one of the most important tasks of young adulthood. The moral and ethical domain also undergoes further maturation during the young adult period. Works by both Gilligan and Kohlberg are presented to show how moral thinking changes with age for both males and females. (Contains 15 references.) (JDM)

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Developmental Counseling: The Young Adult Period

by
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DEVELOPMENTAL COUNSELING: THE YOUNG ADULT PERIOD

CRITICAL ISSUES IN YOUNG ADULT DEVELOPMENT

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The two decades between the end of adolescence and the beginning of midlife (approximately 20-40 years of age) are characterized by (a) the completion of previous developmental tasks and (b) the initiation of new life experiences. Young adults must synthesize earlier life events as they move into a period filled with new and exciting challenges. Critical issues that confront young adults are: formation of significant personal relationships, more advanced cognitive/intellectual functioning, entry into work and career, and improved moral/ethical reasoning.

Being able to successfully navigate these new experiences ensures that young adults will complete this developmental period and move smoothly into middle adulthood. Failure to make appropriate developmental progress puts them at risk for the remainder of their life journey.

Forming Significant Interpersonal Relationships

Perhaps one of the most critical issues facing young adults is the ability to initiate, maintain, and nurture significant interpersonal relationships. If we examine the developmental path preceding young adulthood, it is clear that adolescents are preoccupied with the task of disengagement from their families of origin and establishment of a personal sense

of identity. It would follow, then, that, in succeeding years, they would be concerned with forming new relationships. In other words, the adolescent moves away from familial attachment, becomes focused on self, and then, as a young adult, begins the process of attaching to friends and significant others.

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development accounts for this need to re-attach by identifying this developmental period as one of intimacy versus isolation. Erikson (1963, 1968) believed that a successful resolution of the young adult stage resulted in the formation of intimate relationships. On the other hand, being unable to meet this developmental challenge resulted in a sense of personal isolation. The isolation outcome is viewed as a developmental failure. Those young people who cannot form relationships of a meaningful nature will experience problems in many areas of their lives, both now and in the future.

To elaborate on this theme, it could be said that young adults need to loose themselves in order to find themselves. They must engage in a certain amount of risk-taking in order to learn to become concerned with and committed to other people. If they are unable to take such risks, they will ultimately find themselves to be empty and unfulfilled. Superficial relations like business partnerships or organizational affiliations do not satisfy the need for real intimacy.

Consider the following case study of a young adult who is having difficulty in successfully resolving the intimacy-isolation crisis.

Tony is a 27 year old male who is still living with his mother, grandmother, and a younger sister. He works 25-30 hours per week at a restaurant near his home and also attends a local community college where he usually enrolls for one or two courses each semester. Tony had an older brother who committed suicide about 10 years ago; his parents have been divorced for 8 years and his father lives in another state.

Tony has several friends (mostly females) with whom he hangs out, but has not had any close or intimate relationships with either women or men. He feels that he has tried to form meaningful attachments, but has never found the right person. He experiences a great deal of loneliness when he is not working or attending classes. His primary coping strategy is to drink or get high in order to feel better. Tony also sees himself as being very temperamental and he suspects that this tendency causes people to be turned off and wary of his friendship.

During junior high and high school, Tony remembers that he was not very popular and tended to run around with the non-conformist crowd. He thinks that these peers might have had a negative impact on his socialization patterns and consequently might have caused him to develop poor interpersonal skills.

The young women who are his only friends at the present time are superficial acquaintances who come and go as their circle of friends changes.

Tony would very much like to have a girlfriend or even a close male friend with whom he could share his thoughts and feelings as well as spend time in worthwhile activities. The problem is that he seems to be unable to meet and make such friends and the more he tries, the more frustrated he becomes. Tony wonders if he will ever get married, have children, and develop close personal relationships.

As we can readily observe, Tony is a young adult who is not having an easy time in achieving intimacy as he moves through this developmental period. Erikson's theory would suggest that he is not meeting this challenge in an appropriate manner and will therefore experience additional personal and interpersonal problems when he makes the transition into middle adulthood. It can certainly be argued that the traumatic events of Tony's adolescence (e.g., his brother's suicide and his parents' divorce) may have had a negative influence on his emotional and social development and that these events are in some way responsible for his current problems. Perhaps these events made it difficult for him to achieve a sense of positive identity and, in turn, this disruption of identity formation made it difficult for him to experience intimate relationships with others.

What are some of the counseling implications of a case like Tony's? If we were to approach this client from a humanistic perspective, we would focus on helping him to self-actualize through at least the belongingness and love level of Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs. from the cognitive/behavioral perspective, we would help him understand that making efforts to connect with others is both desirable and possible. From a more psychodynamic point of view, the counselor might focus on earlier life experiences such as the suicide and divorce in an effort to help Tony work through these issues and then begin to move forward in his present life. Whatever specific approach the counselor might take, there is hope that this client could in fact make changes and thus ensure more successful developmental outcomes in the next stage of life.

An interesting assessment tool for use by the counselor in this emotional/social domain is the Measures of Psychosocial Development by Hawley (1988). This self-report instrument measures the level of a person's psychosocial development according to the Erikson hierarchy. It provides helpful information that can be used to determine where a client may be in the emotional/social area; with this information, the counselor can assist the client in working through developmental blocks and setting goals for future growth.

Thinking, Learning, and Problem Solving

For most people, the process of achieving mature cognitive/intellectual development occurs during the young adult years. These mental processes have reached a high degree of maturation by the end of adolescence, but they certainly continue to develop during young adulthood, both in formal (academic) and informal settings. Some of the characteristics of adult cognition that make it different from child or adolescent cognition are (a) increased flexibility; (b) improved problem solving; and (c) better ability to engage in abstract (hypothetical) thinking.

Jean Piaget has provided a well accepted theory of cognitive development that begins with infancy and ends during the adolescent/young adult periods. Piaget's (1963, 1969) fourth and last stage is known as formal operations and emphasizes both problem solving and hypothetical reasoning. It is not exactly clear to what extent this last stage may apply to adult thinking. It is sometimes thought that as many as half of college students have some trouble in consistently using formal operational reasoning. However, this tendency to think in a more concrete manner may be due to the nature of the task itself. For example, balancing one's checkbook requires rather concrete thinking, whereas planning one's future budget may require more sophisticated (and therefore formal

strategies.

In an attempt to further expand Piaget's cognitive developmental theory into the adult years, Patricia Arlen (1975) has identified young adults and older adults as either problem solvers or problem finders. Although the problem solvers' abilities are rather similar to those demonstrated by formal operational thinkers, problem finders may represent a higher level of cognitive/intellectual development. Their thinking strategies are characterized by divergence, creativity, and the ability to discover innovative methods of solving new problems. By contrast, problem solvers tend to be more convergent and focus on the correct solution to a problem or the right answer to a question. Whether or not these abilities represent a fifth stage beyond formal operations has not yet been conclusively determined.

Let us examine the following case study to better understand how young adults think and learn.

Jill is a 31 year old woman who has worked as a customer service representative at a department store for the last 10 years. Prior to taking this job, she attended a secretarial school for a year and a half. During her mid-20s, Jill took several courses at a nearby university, but she always had trouble with earning good grades.

Specifically, Jill found it difficult to focus on homework

and to prepare for exams. Although she usually read assigned material, she did not remember much of it and had to review most assignments several times. Also, she had a lot of difficulty in writing papers because she could not express her ideas very well in a formal manner. Due to these problems, Jill decided not to pursue any additional education and continued to work in her job at the department store. She is worried that she will not be able to move up in the company or to get a job at another company unless she improves her skills. She feels trapped by her difficulty with higher level thinking and learning processes because her future options are being compromised.

In this case study, we can see that Jill is having some cognitive/intellectual problems that limit her upward mobility at work. It might be surmised that she has not made a complete transition through the formal operations stage and does not appear to be functioning at the problem finder level. Probably a useful counseling strategy for Jill would be for the counselor to refer her to a college course in study skills. These courses typically emphasize not only how to study, how to complete assignments, and how to prepare for exams, but also teach critical thinking skills and high level problem solving. It is precisely these kinds of skills that are required for success in academic pursuits. In addition, the counselor might help Jill to work on issues related to her academic self-esteem

and improve her ability to make appropriate causal attributions regarding her cognitive/intellectual abilities.

The idea of causal attributions proposed by Weiner (Ames & Ames, 1984) is concerned with how we explain why we succeed or fail. Attributions usually fall into one of four categories: (a) effort (how hard we try); (b) ability (how capable we are); (c) luck (how lucky we are); and (d) task difficulty (how hard the task is). The first two types have been related to an internal locus of control whereas the last two types have been found to be indicative of external locus. Although these causal attributions can be used to explain a variety of behaviors, they have most often been associated with academic skills. However, it should be obvious that they would also apply to other domains, e.g., social interactions. Imagine how inept a person would be if he/she believes that his/her ability to make friends is a matter of luck or that it is simply too difficult to achieve.

Entering Career and Work

To most readers, it will come as no surprise that consideration of the entry into work and career is one of the most important critical issues facing young adults. We might even suggest that this developmental domain is of equal

importance to the formation of intimate personal relationships. This emphasis may be due to the manner in which our society values work achievement and equates personal worth with one's success at a job or career. How often have we attended a social function where, after introducing ourselves, we immediately offer an explanation of what we do?

There is a well accepted theory of career development that covers the entire lifespan. Donald Super (1990, 1976) has outlined five stages of career development: (a) growth (childhood); (b) exploration (adolescence); (c) establishment (young adulthood); (d) maintenance (middle adulthood); and (e) disengagement (old age). The establishment stage begins in the early 20s and extends until the early 40s. It focuses on the process of putting one's career in place and providing for future growth potential. There are three substages: (a) stability (staying in one's job); (b) consolidation (achieving security and recognition); and (c) advancement (moving ahead in one's career). Super's belief is that career is related to one's personality and is especially affected by an individual's self-concept. That is, the internal picture we have of ourselves is both shaped by and helps to shape our choice of job and career. The young adult who fails to engage in appropriate career exploration during adolescence will experience difficulty with the establishment stage. This developmental failure could express itself in terms of personal and interpersonal distress and could obviously affect the

person's ability to move into the midlife stage.

Following is a case study of a young woman whose work/career development is problematic.

Jean is a 35 year old woman who is married and the mother of two children, ages 7 and 5. Her husband is a successful attorney who is very supportive of his wife's desire to work outside the home. Jean graduated from college with a liberal arts degree, but was never able to make a firm decision about the type of career she wanted.

During the past 10 years, Jean has worked as a hostess at a restaurant, a legal secretary, a teacher's aide, and now she is working for a telemarketing company. Jean has difficulty in staying at a job for more than a couple of years and always seems vaguely dissatisfied with the kind of work she is doing. She is worried that, as she is approaching middle age,the opportunity to advance in a career is slipping away from her. Although Jean sees herself as a stable and responsible person, her work experiences seem to suggest that she is lacking some important personal qualities that are necessary for effective career development.

One of the interesting differences in the training of counselors versus other helping professionals is that counselors study career development theory as well as career

counseling techniques. For this reason, counselors are able to offer assistance to their clients in the area of work/career. In Jean's case, a counselor might help her to deal with some of these issues by asking the following questions:

1. Do the jobs she has chosen fit her personality?
2. Do the jobs she has chosen fit her aptitudes?
3. Do these jobs fit her cognitive/intellectual abilities, including formal educational experiences?

and

4. Are these jobs fulfilling her personal and interpersonal needs?

If the answers to these questions are negative, then it should be fairly clear why jean has had problems with her career. Ideally, a person's work should be congruent with one's personality, one's aptitudes, one's cognitive/intellectual abilities, and should provide the person with a sense of satisfaction in the form of tangible and intangible reinforcements.

An interesting application of the congruence between personality and specific jobs/careers has been provided by John Holland. Holland's (1992) six personality typologies are: (a) social; (b) investigative; (c) realistic; (d) artistic; (e) enterprising; and (f) conventional. According to Holland, individuals have a configuration of typologies that can be linked to particular job types. For example, a person who is S-I (primarily social and secondarily

investigative) might be well suited to a career as a nurse or teacher. A R-C typology (primarily realistic and secondarily conventional) might be suited to a career as an electrician or bank teller. Instruments like the Self Directed Search by Holland (1977) can be used to assess an individual's typology which in turn can be cross-referenced to job categories in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles.

Making Moral and Ethical Decisions

One characteristic that seems to set young adults apart from children and adolescents is their greater awareness of morality. This is not to suggest that young adults are inherently more moral than younger persons, but they do have a better grasp of moral/ethical issues and problems. This is in part due to their advanced level of cognitive development; in fact, the moral developmental theory proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg is closely modelled after Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

Kohlberg (1969, 1972) described moral development as progressing through three levels: (a) pre-conventional (0-10 years of age); (b) conventional (10-20 years); and (c) post-conventional (over 20 years of age). Obviously, the post-conventional level applies to young adulthood. Each of these

levels consists of two stages; the post-conventional stages are social contract orientation and universal ethical principle orientation. During the social contract stage, a person's moral judgments are primarily derived from an understanding that correct moral behavior has mutual benefits for oneself as well as others. For example, when we stop at a traffic light (correct moral behavior), we allow other vehicles and pedestrians to move. Thus, the outcome is mutually beneficial. The universal ethical principle stage is problematic since Kohlberg ultimately decided that it existed in theory and not in practice. It is supposed to imply that moral decisions are made strictly on the basis of personal ethical standards that may be independent of societal conventions. For example, one individual might oppose abortion because she believes it to be morally wrong, but another individual might favor it because he believes it to be morally correct. Neither individual is making a moral judgment on the basis of external (societal) factors.

The issue of stage regression means that individuals often move backward to an earlier stage in their moral decision-making abilities. Thus, persons in their 20s might be functioning at the level of a child or adolescent but later, they may progress again to the higher level. Kohlberg believed that moral education programs could assist people in improving their moral judgments and could also reduce the tendency to regress.

Carol Gilligan (1982, 1988) criticized Kohlberg's theory because she believed that it was intrinsically biased against women. Her objection was that it focused on moral obligation (which is more characteristic of men) and did not allow for moral decisions made on the basis of love and nurturance (more associated with women). Therefore, Gilligan suggested that females' moral development may be underestimated by Kohlberg's stages. She labelled these male and female moral differences as morality of justice and morality of care, respectively. Most developmentalists agree that Gilligan has detected a serious flaw in Kohlberg's theory and is attempting to achieve some degree of balance between male and female moral/ethical development.

Consider this case study that deals with a young man's issues of moral development.

Alex is a 25 year old man who is working as a counselor with a private rehabilitation agency. He was born in Europe, but has lived in the United States for the past several years. He comes from a small and close-knit Jewish family where traditional values are highly prized. In addition, most of his friends are married or engaged to be married.

Alex is experiencing a serious moral crisis because he thinks that he might be gay. Neither his family nor his Jewish cultural background would approve of this lifestyle. Alex has

no problem in accepting himself as being gay, but he is troubled by the conflict between his personal values and those of his family/culture. He has been unable to come to terms with this issue and is experiencing a great deal of stress and some depression because he cannot resolve this moral dilemma.

This situation is typical of the types of moral dilemmas that can arise when a person's value system is in conflict with cultural or societal values. The task of the counselor in this case is tricky: she must help the client to clarify his own values without imposing her own values on him. Once the client has successfully clarified which values are most important to him, then the counselor can proceed to assist him in setting goals and implementing strategies to achieve those goals. Although it may not be possible to change the attitudes of Alex's family or culture, it is possible for him to resolve this problem in a positive manner for himself. Resolution of this moral dilemma should help him to avoid abnormal levels of both stress and depression.

Conclusion

All of the developmental theories that have been considered here have merit in providing counselors with

knowledge about how clients may be functioning as they move through the young adult years. The case studies that have been presented give snapshots of individuals whose developmental problems may be typical of real client issues. The particular counseling approach favored by a given counselor is less important than his ability to genuinely understand the client's developmental needs and how those special concerns can be dealt with.

For example, a specific counselor might use a psychodynamic approach to help a client gain insight into early childhood experiences that may impact on current relationship issues. Another counselor who prefers a cognitive/behavioral approach might achieve similar results by focusing on current thoughts and actions. Still another counselor using the humanistic approach might help a client self-actualize. What is ultimately important is that the counselor can assist the client in understanding developmental themes, setting goals, and making positive changes. After all, it is the process of change that is at the heart of counseling.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered development during the young adult period. Just as adolescence is often seen as a

transition between childhood and later life, so too can young adulthood be seen as a transition from adolescence to mature adulthood. Although many of the issues of young adults continue to confront older adults, there are still special issues associated with this part of the lifespan.

The emotional/social domain of development is best represented by the theory of Erikson; his young adult stage focuses on the need to form significant personal relationships. For those young people who fail to do this, there will be more difficulty in making the transition into middle adulthood and beyond. This intimacy/isolation dichotomy represents a well accepted view of one of the major critical issues of this period.

With respect to cognitive/intellectual development, both Piaget and Arlen have provided insight into how young adults' thinking and learning processes change and mature. Since there is no clear demarcation between adolescence and young adulthood for Piaget's formal operations stage, it is obvious that mental abilities like problem solving and abstract reasoning are typical of both periods. For that matter, young adults continue to use concrete thinking strategies when those strategies are appropriate to a given situation. Arlen has described a more mature cognitive dimension in which individuals engage in either problem solving (convergent) or problem finding (divergent) modes of thinking.

The task of moving into work/career is without doubt one

of the most important tasks of young adulthood. Super's developmental theory of careers stresses the need to establish oneself in a job by becoming stable at work, consolidating one's gains, and advancing toward future goals. If these outcomes are not achieved, then career satisfaction and personal rewards will not be realized. Trait/factor theories like the one by Holland have been used to describe the need for a close fit between one's personality type and specific job categories. All of these career theories focus on the critical role that positive self-concept plays in career development.

Finally, the moral/ethical domain undergoes further maturation during young adulthood. Post-conventional moral reasoning as described by Kohlberg involves an understanding that correct moral behaviors should be mutually beneficial to oneself and others. A young adult might also demonstrate the highest stage of moral development in which she acts on the basis of self-determined personal ethical principles. Gilligan has attempted to show how men and women may be different in their approach to moral decision-making; men may tend to act out of obligation while women may tend to act out of care. Research indicates that moral education programs do yield results, but are somewhat counterbalanced by the tendency of many individuals to regress to lower stages. Perhaps the greatest contribution of both Gilligan and Kohlberg has been to focus our attention on how moral thinking changes with age.

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